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WASHINGTON-As the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) meets in Madrid this month to decide which member state will serve as its chair in 2009, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom strongly recommends that the United States withhold support from one of the declared candidates: Kazakhstan.

"The OSCE chair should be emblematic of the values of this preeminent trans-Atlantic security and human rights organization," said Michael Cromartie, chair of the Commission. "Yet Kazakhstan's blatant and widespread violations of human rights, including those associated with freedom of religion or belief, make it a poor contender, at least in 2009, to lead the OSCE."

Kazakhstan, which emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union with a relatively stable economy based on extensive oil and gas resources, looked promising 10 years ago. Home to scores of ethnic groups-due, in part, to its role as a place of forced exile for dissenters from Czarist Russia and then the Soviet Union-it was an ethnically and religiously diverse society with a government that encouraged tolerance.

Today, however, the Kazakhstan government has joined other states in the former Soviet Union in placing new restrictions on human rights and civil society. The State Department's 2007 *International Religious Freedom Report* notes that Kazakhstan's "religious laws narrow the legal protections of religious freedom found in the Constitution." Religious groups must comply with onerous registration requirements; unregistered groups have endured increasing fines, and purportedly "non-traditional" religious groups are often refused permission to register or their applications are substantially delayed. Recently, the government has targeted minority religious groups in spurious criminal cases, and used property disputes as a tool of pressure against the Hare Krishna community.

There are at least 300 political prisoners in Kazakhstan who have been convicted on allegedly religion-related charges, according to leading human rights activists. Most of these prisoners are assumed to be Muslims, but it is impossible to know how many are allegedly tied with extremist organizations and how many are simply devout believers who may dissent from

officially favored religious hierarchies. According to the Forum 18 News Service, two Baptist congregations and a Pentecostal one have been caught up most recently in the crackdown on religious practice that has been dubbed Operation Religious Extremism,.

The Kazakhstan government also has a deteriorating record on protecting democratic institutions. The OSCE itself pronounced the country's parliamentary elections in August 2007 "neither free nor fair." Recent constitutional amendments have made current President Nursultan Nazarbayev practically president for life, and changes in election law have made it possible only for the pro-presidential party to win seats in parliament. Moreover, for several years the government has cracked down on independent media.

"Against this background, Kazakhstan should not be rewarded with a key leadership role in an organization that is central to promoting the protection of human rights," Cromartie said. "The Commission calls on the U.S. government and other OSCE states to vote against Kazakhstan's bid to be OSCE chair, and to energetically engage the Kazakhstan government in talks on how to significantly improve its record on human rights, including religious freedom, in part so that its bid eventually can be reconsidered."

**The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom** was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

Michael Cromartie

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